# Self-Control Puts Character into Action: Examining How Leader Character Strengths and Ethical Leadership Relate to Leader Outcomes

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## Abstract

Evidence from a growing number of studies suggests leader character as a means to advance leadership knowledge and practice. Based on this evidence, we propose a process model depicting how leader character manifests in ethical leadership that has positive psychological and performance outcomes for leaders, along with the moderating effect of leaders' self-control on the character strength–ethical leadership–outcomes relationships. We tested this model using multisource data from 218 U.S. Air Force officers (who rated their honesty/humility, empathy, moral courage, self-control, and psychological flourishing) and their subordinates (who rated their officer's ethical leadership) and superiors (who rated the officers' in-role performance). Findings provide initial support for leader character as a mechanism triggering positive outcomes such that only when officers reported a high level of self-control did their honesty/humility, empathy, and moral courage manifest in ethical leadership, associated with higher levels of psychological flourishing and in-role performance. We discuss the implications of these results for future theory development, research, and practice.



**Keywords:** Character strengths, Ethical leadership, In-role performance, Psychological flourishing, Self-control

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"*Character is an integration of habits of conduct superimposed on temperament. It is the will exercised on disposition, thoughts, emotion and action. Will is character in action.*" – Vince Lombardi

The sentiments of Vince Lombardi can be traced to tutelage by his ethics professor Father Ignatius W. Cox at Fordham University and General Douglas MacArthur at West Point, who along with philosophers, theologians and psychologists have noted the importance of character and ethics for motivating performance excellence and human flourishing (Maraniss, 1999). With the advent of the positive psychology and positive organizational behavior fields (Luthans and Yussef-Morgan 2017; Peterson and Seligman 2004), scholars have identified many beneficial outcomes associated with character-based leadership including ethicality and organizational citizenship behavior (Wang and Hackett 2016), enhanced managerial performance (Gentry et al. 2013; Sosik et al. 2012), stress management, and wellbeing (Gavin et al. 2003; Krause and Hayward 2015). The topic is important to understand because of its role in interpersonal relationships, high value in business and society, and potential influences on leadership processes and outcomes (Sosik 2015; Wang and Hackett 2016).

Several studies have addressed the topic of character as the virtuous habits of conduct directed toward personal and societal good (Wright and Quick 2011) and suggest that ethical leadership may provide leaders with a mechanism for the behavioral manifestation of aspects of character, such as honesty/humility, empathy, moral courage, and self-control (Gentry et al. 2013; Sosik et al. in press; Wang and Hackett 2016). Ethical leaders are honest, humble and empathetic with subordinates, courageous in taking unpopular but virtuous stands on issues, and self-controlled when facing challenges and temptations (Brown et al. 2005). These character

strengths represent individual characteristics or moderating influences on leader ethical behavior according to Brown and Treviño's (2006) model of ethical leadership.

Despite the burgeoning literatures on character and ethical leadership, several important gaps remain unaddressed. First, theories of social learning (Bandura 1977) and social exchange (Blau 1964) are two overarching theoretical frameworks that explain how ethical leadership promotes subordinates' beneficial organizational behavior through ethical role-modeling and engendering feelings of trust and fairness (Brown and Treviño 2006). However, this conceptualization of ethical leadership has resulted in an almost exclusive emphasis on subordinates' outcomes and their evaluation of leader effectiveness, thereby calling for additional research on the effects of ethical leadership on the attitudinal and performance outcomes for ethical leaders (Bedi et al. 2016; Brown and Mitchell 2010). Second, studies of the conditions under which ethical leadership may be limited are emerging with topics such as perceived ethical conviction of the leader (Babalola et al. 2017) and supervisor-induced hindrance stress (Quade et al. 2017). However, other topics such as leader personal resources for coping with stress by tapping self-control (Baumeister et al. 2007) have been theoretically identified as boundary conditions of ethical leadership (Sosik et al. 2018), but have not yet been tested. Third, there is a lack of research on leader well-being despite several calls for it based on the stressful nature of leadership, especially in contexts involving ethical compliance, change management, and extreme or dangerous missions (Bernerth and Hirschfeld 2016; Krause and Hayward 2015). Fourth, studies on leadership triads that highlight the importance of leaders accommodating the demands of both superiors and subordinates are extending research on leadership dyads, but this stream of research is nascent (Offstein et al. 2006). Finally, the few empirical examinations of character and ethical leadership have been conducted primarily in business and educational contexts (e.g., Bedi et al. 2016; Wang and Hackett 2016), while largely

ignoring military contexts, where character is valued for sustaining strong ethical climates and often tested in extreme operational contexts (USAF 2015a).

The primary purpose of this study is to address these gaps in the literature by answering a research question that asks whether stronger ethical leadership is associated with the leader antecedent character strengths and leader outcomes for leaders with high versus low levels of self-control. We also test whether ethical leadership mediates those relationships. The findings from this research model explicate the nature of character strengths related to ethical leadership and associated leader outcomes, identify boundary conditions under which ethical leadership processes and leader outcomes are limited, contribute to the literatures on leader wellbeing and leadership triads, and extend ethical leadership research to a military context. While military contexts are more dangerous and extreme than business contexts, they promote professionalism, ethical conduct, and offer leaders similar functional areas to hone skills sought by businesses wishing to employ military veterans.

Building upon ethical leadership research (Brown and Treviño 2006) and theories of social cognition (Bandura 1991a, b), we present a model demonstrating how theoretically-relevant and context-specific leader character strengths (honesty/humility, empathy, moral courage) manifest in ethical leadership behavior associated with beneficial outcomes for leaders (psychological flourishing, in-role performance), via the moderating role of leader self-control. We test this model using multi-source triadic data collected from U.S. Air Force (USAF) officers, their subordinates, and superiors given the consistency between the focal character strengths and USAF core values of “integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do” in consideration of the USAF’s strong ethical climate and extreme operational context. This study provides evidence for the roles of four character strengths in helping leaders to perform

well and flourish. Gaining such understanding is essential because military services are on the vanguard of leadership development, preparing officers and enlisted forces to protect national interests and provide security for citizens (USAF 2015a).

## Theoretical Background, Research Model, and Hypotheses

Brown and Treviño's (2006) model of ethical leadership serves as the conceptual framework for this study. Briefly, this framework proposes that a leader's situational (e.g., ethical context) and individual characteristics (e.g., character strengths) influence the display of ethical leadership which subsequently influences outcomes. The framework also posits that the relationships between a leader's situational and individual characteristics and the display of ethical leadership are moderated by other situational and individual characteristics (e.g., self-control). Ethical leadership research has primarily been grounded in theories of social learning (Bandura 1977) and social exchange (Blau 1964) which explain inter-personal processes between ethical leaders and subordinates. However, the processes examined in this study are intra-personal since they occur within leaders. Accordingly, we use social cognitive theory (SCT) as it applies to moral thought and action (Bandura 1991a) and self-regulation (Bandura 1991b) as a primary base for our hypotheses because it explains intra-personal motivational processes and how they are influenced by situational factors such as experienced stress. Building upon this theoretical foundation, we propose and test a research model that produces a moderated mediation as shown in Fig. 1.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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We selected honesty/humility, empathy, and moral courage as the focal leader character strengths for this study based on SCT of moral thought and action (Bandura 1991a) and prior

research identifying them as core aspects of leader character required for high in-role performance (Gentry et al. 2013; Stephano and Wasylyshyn 2005). SCT posits that personal (traits, behavior, cognition, affect) and contextual (environmental) influences serve as interacting determinants of each other. Our study was conducted within the context of a strong USAF culture that espouses honesty/humility, empathy, and moral courage as core values through doctrine, policy and training (USAF 2015a). We chose leader self-control as a moderator variable based on SCT of self-regulation and research identifying it as an important self-regulatory mechanism for other character strengths (Baumeister and Exline 1999). SCT suggests that self-control is integral to self-regulation of not only moral behavior (Bandura 1991a), but also performance effectiveness and wellbeing (Bandura 1991b).

We examined psychological flourishing and in-role performance as leader outcomes in this study. Psychological flourishing reflects aspects of psychological wellbeing that include having supportive relationships, personal meaning, self-esteem, and optimism (Diener et al. 2010). In-role performance represents the quality of task execution required as part of a leader's formal job description (Williams and Anderson 1991). While in-role performance may differ from performance as a leader (cf. Bass 2008), the USAF considers both task execution and effectiveness as a leader of subordinates under his or her command as task requirements of all officers. Both of these leader outcome variables are considered important by USAF commanders for Airmen to achieve their missions while sustaining their wellbeing (USAF 2015b).

**Ethical Leadership**

Ethical leadership is defined as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown et al. 2005, p.

120). This definition indicates that ethical leaders act as both moral persons and moral managers as they model appropriate behavior for subordinates who gain greater moral awareness through social learning processes (Bandura 1977). As moral persons, ethical leaders are honest and trustworthy, humble in admitting when they are no longer effective, concerned about the development of subordinates, and fair and principled decision-makers. They also behave in accordance with ethical standards. As moral managers, they show keen interest in their subordinates' adherence to ethical standards. They frequently communicate the importance of ethical standards to their subordinates and hold them accountable for moral conduct by enforcing codes of ethics (Brown and Treviño 2006).

Ethical leadership results in several beneficial outcomes. Leaders report more ethical issues to superiors and garner higher levels of trust, interactional fairness, honesty, leader-member exchange, satisfaction, and effectiveness. Subordinates perceive workplace climates to be more ethical, engage in more frequent ethical behavior, exert extra effort, are more effective in their jobs, and report lower levels of work stress and higher levels of job satisfaction, job engagement, psychological wellbeing, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior. Subordinates also possess less turnover intentions and engage in less counterproductive work behaviors. These subordinate outcomes of ethical leadership represent essential fulfillment of leaders' in-role performance and are influenced by leader character (Bedi et al. 2016; Brown and Mitchell 2010; Brown et al. 2005).

**Character Strengths**

Over the centuries, scholars have shown great interest in virtuous forms of leadership, driven by increasing research on ethical leadership and leader character (Wang and Hackett 2016). Character can be defined as "those interpenetrable and habitual qualities within

individuals, and applicable to organizations that both constrain them to desire and pursue personal and societal good" (Wright and Quick 2011, p. 976). Both Western and Eastern classic perspectives on character have informed Peterson and Seligman's (2004) Values in Action (VIA) classification framework, the most prominent and comprehensive contemporary consideration of character in the social sciences (Wright and Quick 2011). This framework identifies 24 character strengths theoretically sorted into six virtues: wisdom and knowledge (creativity, curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness, perspective), courage (bravery, integrity, persistence, vitality), humanity (love, kindness, social intelligence), justice (citizenship, fairness, leadership), temperance (self-control, prudence, forgiveness, humility), and transcendence (spirituality, hope, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, humor). Because the distillation of these character strengths spans many academic fields, Peterson and Seligman (2004) list several labels for each strength. Our goal in choosing labels for the focal character strengths was to select those with psychometrically-sound measures that tap the theoretical essence of the strengths. To this end, we use honesty/ humility, empathy, moral courage, and self-control as labels of the character strengths of integrity, social intelligence, bravery, and self-control, respectively, in Peterson and Seligman's VIA classification framework.

**Character Strengths, Ethical Leadership, and Outcomes**

The research model shown in Fig. 1 positions ethical leadership as a mediator of relationships between leader character strengths and leader psychological flourishing and in-role performance. We first discuss the outcome variables because they are common to our six mediation hypotheses presented below. Ethical leadership is expected to be associated with leader psychological flourishing because ethical leaders show concern for subordinates, model ethical practices, and lead an ethical life (Brown and Treviño 2006). SCT suggests that showing

concern and modeling ethical practices for others are socially approvable acts that serve as a source of self-pride and elicit positive affect from leaders (Bandura 1991a).

A meta-analysis of the trait affect literature (Joseph et al. 2015) reported a positive relationship between leader positive affect and transformational leadership, which is highly correlated with ethical leadership (Bedi et al. 2016; Brown et al. 2005). Leading an ethical life alleviates the stress of hiding one's ethical lapses from being discovered and the shame that comes with it (Owens and Hekman 2012). Consistent with these arguments, Gavin et al. (2003) presented case studies linking aspects of good moral character with the wellbeing of executives.

Ethical leadership also is expected to be positively associated with leader in-role performance. Ethical leaders foster high levels of trust and positive relationships with superiors and subordinates, who view ethical leaders as competent performers. Ethical leaders share this perception as they possess high levels of confidence in their leadership and performance abilities (Brown and Treviño 2006). In support of these arguments, prior research demonstrates positive relationships between ethical leadership and leader effectiveness (e.g., Bedi et al. 2016; Brown et al. 2005) and managerial performance (Williams and Seaman 2016).

Figure 1 positions this study's focal character strengths as antecedents of ethical leadership and the aforementioned leader outcomes. From an SCT perspective, these character strengths reflect moral standards in the self-system that officers compare against their thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors as a means to guide their ethical leadership behavior (Bandura 1991a).

**Honesty/Humility.** Being honest requires straightforwardness of conduct, adherence to the facts (Ashton and Lee 2009), and an understanding of what is morally right or wrong (Six et al. 2007). Honesty is associated with word-deed consistency and sincerity, that often require the humility to accept the truth (Six et al. 2007; Sosik 2015). The USAF's "integrity first" core value

requires the honesty of Airmen whose words and reports must be unquestionable and accurate. Given that integrity is related to a preference for being respected (Schlenker 2008), the USAF's principle of "respect as the lifeblood of our profession" challenges Airmen to a "heightened personal sense of humility" required to "respect the humbling mission placed in our hands by the American people" (USAF 2015a, p. 4).

As suggested by SCT (Bandura 1991a), honesty is an attractive trait for an ethical role model to possess because truth-telling adds to the leader's credibility and likeability associated with the moral person aspect of ethical leadership. As a prototypical leader characteristic, honesty is an expectation by which subordinates judge whether leaders are worthy of emulation (Brown and Treviño 2006), thereby providing a moral standard required for ethical leadership behavior (Bandura 1991a). Humility may also be an attractive trait because it allows for nonegocentric and sincere interactions required to support ethical leadership behaviors such as listening to subordinates' opinions and keeping their best interests in mind (Owens and Hekman 2012). Meta-analytic results linking leader honesty and subordinate perceptions of ethical leadership support these arguments (Bedi et al. 2016).

Leaders whose honesty/humility manifests in their ethical leadership are likely to experience psychological flourishing and perform well. SCT (Bandura 1991a) suggests that honesty and humility are sources of self-respect and positive affect that alleviate stress, facilitate supporting and rewarding relationships, and elicit respect from others (Gavin et al. 2003). Honesty is a highly-valued trait associated with the avoidance of counterproductive workplace behaviors that often result in subsequent experienced stress (Johnson et al. 2011). Humility may enhance in-role performance by providing the ability to acknowledge one's limitations, and be open to advice (Johnson et al. 2011), which "takes the pressure off" and results in psychological

wellbeing (Owens and Hekman 2012, p. 795). Prior research has identified honesty/ humility as a predictor of superiors' ratings of managerial performance (Johnson et al. 2011). Thus, we posit:

***Hypothesis 1***: Ethical leadership mediates the relationships between leader honesty/humility and the leader outcomes, (a) psychological flourishing and (b) in-role performance.

**Empathy.** Empathy involves being socially intelligent, confident and even-tempered in social settings, and sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others (Hogan 1969; Johnson et al. 1983). Sensitivity is an implicit leader prototype that subordinates expect in leaders (Bass 2008). The USAF's core value of "service beyond self" alludes to empathy in its requirement of "treating others with dignity and valuing them as individuals." Empathy allows for greater understanding of diverse Airmen and their unique personal characteristics gained through more compassionate interactions (USAF 2015a, p. 7).

SCT (Bandura 1991a) suggests that empathy is an attractive trait for an ethical role model to possess because it is a moral standard that reflects concern for the welfare of others. As the self evaluates itself against social and moral standards, positive affect associated with empathy provides feedback to the self that motivates ethical behavior (Bandura 1991a). Empathy enables leaders to commit to the moral development of their subordinates (Wright and Quick 2011). Thus, empathy is likely to manifest in ethical leadership behaviors such as listening to subordinates' opinions and advocating for them (Brown and Mitchell 2010). Mahsud et al. (2010) reported a positive association between leader empathy and ethical leadership.

Leaders whose empathy manifests in their ethical leadership are likely to experience psychological flourishing and perform well. Empathy may promote ethical leadership behaviors that show interest in subordinates' concerns and understanding of their needs. SCT suggests that

experiencing positive affect and having supporting and rewarding relationships with subordinates enable ethical leaders to cope with stressful conditions and perform well (Bandura 1991a). Effective leaders are highly considerate, sensitive to the needs of their subordinates, and perform their complex tasks well (Kellett et al. 2002). Thus, we posit:

***Hypothesis 2***: Ethical leadership mediates the relationships between leader empathy and the leader outcomes, (a) psychological flourishing and (b) in-role performance.

**Moral Courage.** Courage is often considered in its physical, psychological, and moral forms, but more practical forms of courage have been conceptualized in business and military contexts. In the USAF's profession of arms, a relevant type of courage is professional moral courage, which Sekerka et al. (2009) describe as an attribute that motivates and enables individuals to address moral issues, consider multiple values, endure threats, go beyond compliance, and pursue moral goals. In terms of the USAF's core value of "integrity first," such forms of moral courage are required to take "necessary personal or professional risks, make decisions that may be unpopular, and admit our mistakes" (USAF 2015a, p. 6).

Moral courage provides a moral standard that promotes ethical leadership behavior (Bandura 1991a). When leaders possess moral courage, they are inclined towards values- driven achievements (rather than achievements attained through any means), moral ideals, and enforcement of ethics codes (Sekerka et al. 2009). These inclinations parallel the moral person and moral manager aspects of ethical leadership such as living an ethical life, defining success by both the ends and means to attain them, discussing ethical values with subordinates, and disciplining them for ethics violations. In support of this argument, Riggio et al.'s (2010) virtue-based measure of ethical leadership contains items tapping fortitude (i.e., courage) that are highly correlated with Brown et al.'s (2005) measure of ethical leadership.

Leaders whose moral courage manifests in their ethical leadership are likely to experience psychological flourishing and perform well. SCT (Bandura 1991b) suggests that the integration of personal and professional values and pursuit of moral goals associated with moral courage may provide aspects of self-motivation such as personal meaning and positive self-regard that are elements of psychological flourishing (Diener et al. 2010). Regarding in-role performance, moral courage provides leaders with the volition to actively promote ethics despite pushback from others (Sekerka et al. 2009). Several studies demonstrate that leaders who take such brave actions are rated as effective performers (Gentry et al. 2013; Palanski et al. 2015; Sosik et al. 2012). Thus, we posit:

***Hypothesis 3:*** Ethical leadership mediates the relationships between leader moral courage and the leader outcomes, (a) psychological flourishing and (b) in-role performance.

**Leader Self-control as a Moderator**

Often called "willpower" by philosophers and laypeople (Kugelmann 2013), self-control is defined by psychologists as "the capacity to alter or override dominant response tendencies and to regulate behavior, thoughts, and emotions" (de Ridder et al. 2012, p. 77). Self-control is a trait underlying the self-regulation of cognition and behavior according to the SCT of moral thought and action (Bandura 1991a), and also serves as an important personal resource that "may magnify or diminish resource loss" in stressful contexts according to conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hagger 2015, p. 91). COR theory posits that individuals strive to accumulate personal resources, such as character strengths, that enable them to cope with experienced stress and protect their wellbeing (Hobfoll 1989). As such, self-control is essential to the demonstration of all three USAF core values. Putting "integrity first" requires Airmen to control their impulses and act ethically. Modeling "service beyond self" requires Airmen to have the discipline to

follow regulations and be self-controlled regarding the beliefs, authority and diversity of others. Enacting “excellence in all we do” requires commitment to a disciplined life of restraint and continual growth (USAF 2015a).

The strength model of self-control (Baumeister et al. 2007) proposes that self-regulation requires exertion of energy or willpower that becomes exhausted and results in ego depletion, a state of diminished self-control strength. Both the strength model of self-control and COR theory posit that stress arises and performance diminishes when there is a mismatch between situational demands and the availability of personal resources as individuals use up their reserve of self-control (Hagger 2015). While self-control can be replenished through rest, conservation, good habits, and glucose supplementation, individuals with high trait self-control have a larger pool of willpower resources to draw upon for self-regulation (Hagger et al. 2010). Baumeister et al. (2007) argued that self-control assists in tasks that require the controlling of attention, emotions, impulses, thoughts, choices, and social processing (i.e., establishing successful relationships). Through self-regulation processes that compare current aspects of the self to social or moral standards, self-control may provide volitional resources to engage in and sustain ethical behavior. Hagger (2015) pointed out that “self-regulatory skills...and personal traits such as trait self-control... have been identified as possible moderators of the effects of the limited resource on behavior” (p. 90), such as effects of honesty/humility, empathy, and moral courage on ethical leadership. Thus, we expected leader self-control to moderate relationships between these character strengths and ethical leadership.

The manifestation of honesty/humility in ethical leadership behavior requires attention to moral standards and the will to uphold them (Brown et al. 2005). It also requires the resisting of temptations to deviate from the truth or engage in narcissistic rather than humble behaviors that

are inconsistent with moral standards (Bandura 1991a). By focusing one's attention on moral standards of truthfulness and modesty, self-controlled leaders may feel more confident in manifesting their honesty/humility in ethical leadership behaviors. Prior empirical research has shown positive relationships between self-control and self-efficacy (Schlenker 2008). In addition, meta-analytic results (de Ridder et al. 2012; Hagger et al. 2010) indicate that individuals with high self-control engage in more ethical behaviors and less undesirable behaviors than those with low self-control. Thus, we posit:

***Hypothesis 4***: The positive relationship between leader honesty/humility and ethical leadership is stronger when leader self-control is high than when it is low.

The manifestation of empathy in ethical leadership behavior requires attention to emotions, thoughts, and social processing because "feelings inform us when things are not right—they act as ethical alarms" (Brown and Mitchell 2010, p. 591). It also requires recognizing when to display supportive behaviors such as detecting any feelings of workplace injustice, listening to subordinates' concerns, and acting in their best interest (Mahsud et al. 2010). Such empathic awareness provides direction for self-control (Bandura 1991b). In addition, any tendencies for angry outbursts or aggressive behavior directed at subordinates may be tempered with self-control to more positively influence subordinates' perceptions of the leader (Brown and Mitchell 2010). By focusing one's attention on moral standards of even-temperedness and sensitivity to others espoused in USAF culture, officers with high self-control may feel more efficacious in manifesting their empathy in ethical leadership behaviors because they have the willpower resources to be supportive when subordinates are anxious or lack confidence. Individuals with high self-control regulate their emotions more effectively, have

better interpersonal skills, and show more concern for others than those with low self-control (de Ridder et al. 2012; Tangney et al. 2004). Thus, we posit:

***Hypothesis 5***: The positive relationship between leader empathy and ethical leadership is stronger when leader self-control is high than when it is low.

The manifestation of moral courage in ethical leadership behavior requires paying attention to the control of fear and the personal choice and volition to take moral action despite personal risks. It also requires resisting the innate tendency to avoid such risks by rationalizing that they are unnecessary, uncomfortable, or psychologically painful (Sekerka et al. 2009). SCT of moral thought and action (Bandura 1991a) suggests that by focusing one's attention on controlling fear and harnessing the volition required for moral action, leaders with high self-control may be more efficacious in manifesting their moral courage in ethical leadership behaviors. In a study of finance managers, Harbour and Kisfalvi (2014) identified ego strength (i.e., high self-control) as providing the volition to take courageous action in risky and difficult situations. Sekerka et al. (2009) argued that self-control is required to harness the courage to take moral action such as displaying ethical leadership. Thus, we posit:

***Hypothesis 6***: The positive relationship between leader moral courage and ethical leadership is stronger when leader self-control is high than when it is low.

It is also likely that leader self-control influences the strength of the indirect effects of the focal leader character strengths on the leader outcomes through ethical leadership, thereby demonstrating conditional indirect effects. COR theory suggests that in stressful situations, larger reserves of self-control serve to buttress other personal resources, such as honesty/humility, empathy, and moral courage, and enhance wellbeing and performance outcomes (Hagger 2015). Similarly, SCT suggests that such self-regulatory control has beneficial effects on emotional

states and performance (Bandura 1991b). Results of self-control studies and meta-analyses (e.g., de Ridder et al. 2012; Hagger et al. 2010; Tangney et al. 2004) suggest that high self-control provides additional willpower resources that allow for strong volition to take moral action such as displaying ethical leadership, and that large pools of such resources are positively associated with psychological wellbeing and in-role performance. As leaders more actively display ethical leadership, such behaviors showcasing their honesty/humility, empathy, and moral courage are more favorable evaluated by self and superiors, resulting in higher levels of leader outcomes. Thus, we proffer the following moderated mediation hypotheses:

***Hypothesis 7***: Leader self-control moderates the indirect relationships between leader honesty/humility and leader outcomes through ethical leadership. Specifically, the indirect effects on the leader outcomes, (a) psychological flourishing and (b) in-role performance, are greater when leader self-control is high than when it is low.

***Hypothesis 8***: Leader self-control moderates the indirect relationships between leader empathy and leader outcomes through ethical leadership. Specifically, the indirect effects on the leader outcomes, (a) psychological flourishing and (b) in-role performance, are greater when leader self-control is high than when it is low.

***Hypothesis 9*** Leader self-control moderates the indirect relationships between leader moral courage and leader outcomes through ethical leadership. Specifically, the indirect effects on the leader outcomes, (a) psychological flourishing and (b) in-role performance, are greater when leader self-control is high than when it is low.

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

Participants in our all-volunteer sample were U.S. Air Force Captains and their subordinates and superiors. These officers were enrolled in a 5-week leadership training course offered by the Squadron Officer College at Maxwell Air Force Base and represent the focal leaders in this study. Two co-authors in the Squadron Officers College asked the officers if they would be interested in participating in our study and if they could provide a list of names, titles, and email addresses of their subordinates and superiors who may be willing to participate as well as their own names and email addresses. With the contact information of potential respondents, we distributed surveys to 1570 officers attending the course, 1269 of their subordinates, and 1525 of their superiors. Data were collected via an online surveying platform which sent via emails on the first day of class that briefly described the purpose and voluntary nature of the study, time requirement, link to the survey and consent from. Reminder emails were sent to participants 5 weeks after the initial surveys were distributed. A total of 1757 completed surveys were obtained from officers and their subordinates and superiors for a response rate of 40%. Of this total, 743 were officers (who responded about their character strengths and psychological flourishing); 462 were subordinates (who responded about the ethical leadership of their officer); and 552 were superiors (who responded about the officer's in-role performance). Of the 743 responding officers, there were a total of 218 unique matched sets of leader and subordinate reports and 115 unique matched sets of leader, subordinate, and superior ratings, both of which were used for hypothesis testing. Of the 218 leader-subordinate matched sets, 76.1% of the leaders had only a subordinate's report and 23.9% of the officers had multiple subordinates' ratings (29 cases of 2 subordinates, 13 cases of 3 subordinates, 4 cases of 4 subordinates, 5 cases of 5 subordinates, and 1 case of 6 subordinates). For multiple subordinates' ratings of ethical leadership, the ratings of a leader were averaged to represent his or her ethical leadership in the unit ($\eta 2 = 0.79$, ICC1 = 0.25, $F = 1.46$, $p < 0.01$).

Officers ranged in age from 25 to 52, with the average being 31.23 (SD = 4.83). Of these officers, 44.5% had a bachelor's degree while 55.5% had a master's degree; 72.9% were male; and 79.8% were white, 5% were black, 6% were Asian, 4.6% were Hispanic, and 4.6% were others. Forty percent of officers worked in operations, 17% in logistics and support, 9% in acquisitions, 22% in medical and professional services, 2% in special investigations, and 10% in other areas. Subordinates ranged in age from 20 to 68, with the average being 34.52 (SD = 9.67). Of these subordinates, 4.6% graduated from high school only; 30.7% had an associate's degree; 45.9% had a bachelor's degree while 18.8% had a master's degree; 72% were male; and 67% were white, 13.3% were black, 4.6% were Asian, 8.7% were Hispanic, and 6.4% were others. Superiors age range was 27 to 61, with the average being 39.74 (SD = 7.30). Of these superiors, 15.7% had a bachelor's degree while 84.3% had a master's degree; 85.2% were male; and 71.3% were white, 7.8% were black, 5.2% were Asian, 5.2% were Hispanic, and 10.4% were others.

The USAF requires its officers to demonstrate leadership effectiveness in various jobs and tasks, as most corporations require from their managers. In addition to their leadership roles, all officers worked in functional areas such as flight operations, acquisitions, logistics, IT support, financial and legal services, and special investigations. These functional areas are commonly found in business and industry (Bass 2008) and are consistent with the conceptualization of business as systems involved in the exchange of goods and services. The skills required to perform these duties are often sought by businesses wishing to employ military veterans. The USAF considers their officers as practitioners engaged in the "profession of arms" who are entrusted with national security (USAF 2015a). The service these professionals provide is as important as other services provided by business professionals. Further, professionals in both the USAF and businesses commonly value integrity, teamwork, and continuous process/personal

improvement in their culture, selection, and training. Thus, we considered the sample as appropriate for testing the hypotheses and consistent with business contexts.

## Measures

### Character Strengths

Four self-rated measures of character considered relevant to ethical leadership were obtained from each focal leader. Honesty/humility was measured using seven items of sincerity, greed-avoidance, and modesty dimensions from the HEXACO-60 assessment of personality dimensions (Ashton and Lee 2009). According to Johnson et al. (2011), honesty/ humility "is a recently-identified sixth dimension of personality beyond factors similar to the Big Five and has better predicted some components of job performance than these five factors" and has been linked to increases in employee ethicality (p. 857). Evidence of the construct validity of this scale is provided in our study as well as prior research (e.g., Ashton and Lee 2009; Johnson et al. 2011). Three items of fairness in the original honesty/humility scale were removed from the survey (e.g., "I'd be tempted to use counterfeit money, if I were sure I could get away with it") because participating officers are not only bound by an honor code, but also expected to practice USAF core values, such as integrity. Sample items read, "I wouldn't pretend to like someone just to get that person to do favors for me" (sincerity), "Having a lot of money is not especially important to me" (greed- avoidance), and "I think that I am entitled to more respect than the average person is (reversed item)" (modesty). Items were measured on a 5-point response scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) ($\alpha = 0.76$).

Empathy was measured as a multidimensional construct using 15 items of its 3 subscales developed by Hogan (1969) and validated by Johnson et al. (1983), each of which includes five items of social self-confidence, even-temperedness, and sensitivity. Social self-confidence

assesses one's efficacy in social interactions (sample item "I am a good social mixer"). Even-temperedness refers to stability of emotions in social settings (sample item: "I am usually calm and not easily upset"). The sensitivity dimension of empathy represents awareness of one's own and others' emotions (sample item: "I have seen some things so sad that I almost felt like crying"). Items of the empathy measure were rated on a 5-point response scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test a higher order model of empathy with three subdimensions. This model had a good fit with the data ($\chi 2(87) = 176.39$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.07; SRMR = 0.06). Thus, we used a composite measure of empathy using all 15 items ($\alpha = 0.75$).

Professional moral courage was measured using a 10-item scale developed by Sekerka et al. (2009). This measure taps one's propensity toward moral agency and goal setting, going beyond compliance, and using virtuous principles and values while enduring threats (sample item: "I hold my ground on moral matters, even if there are opposing social pressures"). Leaders rated themselves on a scale of 1 (never true) to 7 (always true) ($\alpha = 0.90$).

Lastly, self-control was measured using the 13-item Self- Control Scale developed by Tangney et al. (2004) tapping one's will to self-regulate impulses, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (sample item: "I am good at resisting temptation"). Self-control was rated on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) ($\alpha = 0.89$).

**Ethical Leadership**

We adopted a 10-item scale developed by Brown et al. (2005) to assess a subordinate's perception of the extent to which his or her leader demonstrates and promotes normatively appropriate conduct through personal action and in interpersonal relationships (sample item:

"This officer sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics"). Responses were made on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) ($\alpha = 0.92$).

**Leader Outcomes**

An 8-item scale of psychological flourishing developed by Diener et al. (2010) was adopted to assess officers' own subjective wellbeing. This measure taps a leader's self-perceived social and psychological wellbeing comprising positive relationships, feelings of competence and self-respect, and having meaning and purpose in life (sample item: "My social relationships are supportive and rewarding"). Survey instructions directed the officers to consider these items in terms of their leadership role over the 30 days prior to survey administration. This measure was rated on a 5-point scale of 1 (never) to 5 (extremely often) ($\alpha = 0.87$).

USAF captains are evaluated by their commanding officers in terms of their operational task requirements and leadership action requirements specified in USAF doctrine, regulations, training, and job descriptions. By virtue of their rank, they have command over subordinates, which means they have "the authority and responsibility for effectively using available resources and planning the employment of, organizing, directing, coordinating, and controlling military forces for the accomplishment of assigned missions" (USAF 2015b, p. 9). The meaning of command is consistent with definitions of leadership (cf. Bass 2008). Further, superiors' evaluations of such operational and command requirements better reflect officers' operational task fulfillment and leadership fulfillment associated with outcomes of being a moral person and moral manager, respectively, than do subordinates' evaluations (Brown and Treviño 2006). As such,

in-role performance of focal leaders was assessed by their superiors with a 7-item scale developed by Williams and Anderson (1991). This measure focuses on performance in particular

tasks, including command requirements, specified in job descriptions and is considered suitable for generally representing task performance of the officers who worked in various areas (sample item: “This officer performs tasks that are expected of him/her”). Ratings were made on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) $\alpha = 0.87$.

### Control Variables

Because character strengths and their correlates may differ for men and women across the life span and education (Peterson and Seligman 2004), we measured leaders’ age, gender, and education. However, these demographic controls were excluded from hypothesis testing to preserve statistical power, given their nonsignificant relationships with ethical leadership and outcomes.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

**Measurement Model.** Response confidentiality, counterbalanced item order, and improving response scale were ensured during the survey to minimize potential method artifacts (Podsakoff et al. 2012). To further address issues of common method variance and discriminant validity of measures, we conducted CFA for leader-rated variables of the four character strengths and psychological flourishing by taking an item parceling method for two reasons: (1) the subject-to-item ratio (218:53 = 4.11:1) is too low to meet the acceptable lower bound limit of a 5:1 ratio; and (2) the possibility of concealing multidimensional structure in each subfactor of a construct (e.g., empathy) is limited (Bandalos 2002). CFA results indicated that a 5-factor model with honesty/humility, empathy, moral courage, self-control, and psychological flourishing had a better fit with data ($\chi 2(80) = 117.94$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.05; SRMR = 0.05) than

other alternative models: (a) a 3-factor model where items of honesty/humility, empathy, and moral courage were collapsed into a factor ($\chi 2(87) = 321.39$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.11; SRMR = 0.09); (b) a 2-factor model where all items of character strengths were collapsed into a factor ($\chi 2(89) = 728.96$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.58, RMSEA = 0.18; SRMR = 0.15); and (c) a 1-factor model where all items of 5 leader-rating variables were collapsed into a global factor ($\chi 2(90) = 895.00$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.47, RMSEA = 0.20; SRMR = 0.15).

**Descriptive Statistics.** Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations of the study variables. A review of the correlations indicates that most demographic controls were not significantly associated with ethical leadership and outcome variables. Leaders' gender was correlated with psychological flourishing ($r = .181$, $p < 0.05$); however, this correlation did not make any notable change in study findings. Thus, we did not retain any demographic variables in hypothesis tests to preserve statistical power.

### Hypothesis Tests

Study hypotheses were tested in an interlinked, yet stepwise manner by following the procedure developed by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007). We first examined mediation hypotheses (Hypotheses 1–3). After controlling for other covariates, we estimated an indirect effect ab, where a represents the regression coefficient between an independent variable and a mediator while b denotes the mediator to dependent variable association. Because the distribution of ab is not symmetrical and is usually positively skewed, we adopted a bootstrap method to compute 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI) with 10,000 bootstrapped sub-samples. Second, after examining moderation hypotheses (Hypotheses 4–6), we incorporated the moderation effects into the mediation models, producing an overall moderated mediation model, also known as conditional indirect effects (Hypotheses 7–9). To test the conditional indirect

effects, we examined the indirect effect ab at different levels of the moderator as one standard deviation above and below the mean of the moderator (Preacher et al. 2007). When the moderation effects were estimated, we mean-centered the variables used as a component of the interaction term to make results more interpretable.

Table 2 presents the regression results for the mediation hypotheses (Hypotheses 1–3) where ethical leadership mediates the relationships between leader character strengths and outcomes. While ethical leadership was associated with psychological flourishing (in model 5, B = 0.118, $p < 0.05$) and in-role performance (in model 6, B = 0.226, $p < 0.05$), honesty/humility was not related to ethical leadership in model 1, indicating that both Hypothesis 1a (indirect effect ab = 0.022 × 0.118 = 0.003, boot SE = 0.008, 95% CI [–0.010, 0.021]) and Hypothesis 1b (indirect effect ab = 0.021 × 0.226 = 0.005, boot SE = 0.018, 95% CI [– 0.024, 0.052]) were not supported.

Empathy was not related to ethical leadership (in model 2, B = 0.020, ns), though ethical leadership was associated with psychological flourishing (in model 5, B = 0.118, $p < 0.05$), thereby not supporting Hypothesis 2a (indirect effect ab = 0.020 × 0.118 = 0.002, boot SE = 0.012, 95% CI [–0.019, 0.029]). However, Hypothesis 2b was supported, in that empathy was associated with ethical leadership (in model 2-1, B = 0.213, $p < 0.05$), which in turn was also related to in-role performance (in model 6, B = 0.226, $p < 0.05$, indirect effect ab = 0.213 × 0.226 = 0.048, boot SE = 0.043, 95% CI [0.001, 0.175]).

Moral courage was related to ethical leadership (in model 3, B = 0.116, $p < 0.05$), which in turn was associated with psychological flourishing (in model 5, B = 0.118, $p < 0.05$), thereby supporting Hypothesis 3a (indirect effect ab = 0.116 × 0.118 = 0.014, boot SE = 0.010, 95% CI [0.001, 0.047]). However, Hypothesis 3b was not supported, because moral courage was not

related to ethical leadership (in model 3-1, B = 0.080, ns), while ethical leadership was associated with in-role performance (in model 6, B = 0.226, $p < 0.05$; indirect effect ab = 0.080 × 0.226 = 0.018, boot SE = 0.019, 95% CI [– 0.005, 0.082]).

In Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6, we predicted that the positive relationships between leader character and ethical leadership would be stronger when leader self-control was higher. As presented in models 1–3 of Table 2, the interaction effects of honesty/humility with self-control (B = 0.250, $p < 0.01$), empathy with self-control (B = 0.360, $p < 0.01$), and moral courage with self-control (B = 0.118, $p < 0.01$) on ethical leadership were positive and significant, while leader self-control per se was not related to ethical leadership. These results supported Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6. To probe the interaction patterns, we plotted two simple slopes at 1SD above and below the mean of leader self-control, while setting all covariates to their sample mean (Aiken and West 1991). As shown in Fig. 2, the positive relationship between honesty/humility and ethical leadership was significant and stronger when self-control was high (simple slope B = 0.198, SE = 0.077, $p < 0.05$) than when it was low (simple slope B = –.062, SE = 0.070, ns). The positive relationship between empathy and ethical leadership was also significant and stronger when self-control was high (simple slope B = 0.288, SE = 0.118, $p < 0.05$) than when it was low (simple slope B = –.091, SE = 0.095, ns). Likewise, the positive association between moral courage and ethical leadership was significant and stronger when self-control was high (simple slope B = 0.190, SE = 0.056, $p < 0.01$) than when it was low (simple slope B = 0.051, SE = 0.045, ns).

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Insert Tables 1 and 2 and Figure 2 about here

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Lastly, we predicted in Hypotheses 7, 8, and 9 that indirect effects of leader character on leader outcomes through ethical leadership would be greater under high leader self-control. These conditional indirect effects were computed after controlling for all covariates included in the regression analyses. Results indicated that only when self-control was high, there were significant indirect effects of leader honesty/humility through ethical leadership on psychological flourishing (Hypothesis 7a: indirect effect ab = 0.020, boot SE = 0.014, 95% CI [0.001, 0.057]) and in-role performance (Hypothesis 7b: indirect effect ab = 0.049, boot SE = 0.034, 95% CI [0.002, 0.144]), supporting Hypothesis 7. Examination of conditional indirect effects of empathy also revealed that only when self-control was high, there were significant indirect effects of leader empathy through ethical leadership on psychological flourishing (Hypothesis 8a: indirect effect ab = 0.027, boot SE = 0.019, 95% CI [0.001, 0.086]) and in-role performance (Hypothesis 8b: indirect effect ab = 0.106, boot SE = 0.074, 95% CI [0.004, 0.306]), supporting Hypothesis 8. Lastly, the indirect effects of moral courage on psychological flourishing (Hypothesis 9a: indirect effect ab = 0.022, boot SE = 0.015, 95% CI [0.001, 0.058]) and in-role performance (Hypothesis 9b: indirect effect ab = 0.056, boot SE = 0.034, 95% CI [0.006, 0.144]) were significant only when leader self-control was high, supporting Hypothesis 9.

## Discussion

### Theoretical Implications

This study has several theoretical implications for the examination of ethical leadership, character strengths, and the role of self-control in organizations. Our findings indicate that in most cases, leader character strengths per se did not predict ethical leadership as their behavioral manifestation, which failed to support their indirect effects on leader outcomes through ethical leadership. Exceptions were empathy and moral courage which had an indirect positive effect on

leader in-role performance and psychological flourishing, respectively, through ethical leadership. These results extend the list of individual characteristics identified in Brown and Treviño's (2006) model of ethical leadership as antecedents and those examined in meta-analyses of ethical leadership studies (e.g., Bedi et al. 2016). As such, our data support the idea that ethical leaders with high empathy are seen as effective performers by superiors, and contribute to the positive psychology literature by adding leaders' in-role performance and psychological flourishing to known outcomes of empathy and moral courage, respectively.

The indirect effects of the character strengths of honesty/humility, empathy, and moral courage on all leader outcomes through ethical leadership were produced only when leader self-control was high. These findings add to emergent literature examining when ethical leaders are more or less effective (e.g., Babalola et al. 2017; Quade et al. 2017). Study results are consistent with Baumeister and Exline's (1999) position that self-control "deserves consideration as the core psychological trait underlying the majority of virtues" (p. 1166) and "is centrally involved in most if not at all virtue" (p. 1178). These authors argue that self-control serves as a "moral muscle" (p. 1170) by bringing attention to moral standards (e.g., honesty/humility), monitoring aspects of the self in relation to others (e.g., empathy), and taking action to alter one's thoughts and emotions to adhere to moral standards (e.g., conquering fear with moral courage). Our findings suggest that self-control produces the indirect effects of honesty/humility on the leader outcomes through ethical leadership by providing greater awareness of "the right thing to do" and volition to "do things the right way in terms of ethics" (Brown et al. 2005, p. 126). Study results also suggest that self-control produces the indirect effects of moral courage on the leader outcomes through ethical leadership by providing the inner directive to alter one's immediate response to fear and take action to conform with ethical expectations despite fear. Thus, our demonstration of self- control as a moderator of the character strengths–ethical leadership–

outcomes relationships provides empirical support for theoretical considerations of self-control by philosophers and psychologists who have described it as a personal resource that puts character into action for the good of self and others (Hagger 2015; Kugelmann 2013).

Study results extend research on moral traits and cognitions of ethical leaders examined in the literature. Leader trait sincerity and humble leader behaviors are core components of humble leadership (Owens and Hekman 2012). Ethical leaders display the humble leader behaviors of modeling ethicality and learning, listening to others, and promoting their development (Brown and Treviño 2006). The positive relationship between leader honesty/humility and ethical leadership behavior for leaders with high self-control found in this study are consistent with qualitative work on humble leadership (Owens and Hekman 2012). Study results also extend work on the role of moral identity and moral attentiveness as antecedents of ethical leadership (e.g., Zhu et al. 2016). Moral identity represents a self-schema grounded in moral trait associations (Aquino and Reed 2002), whereas moral attentiveness represents the extent that individuals focus more on morality and use a moral lens to process stimuli and make sense of experience (Reynolds 2008). Our results identify specific aspects of a moral identity (honesty/humility, empathy, moral courage) and mechanisms of moral attentiveness (self-control) that relate to ethical leadership and enhance the performance and wellbeing of leaders.

Regarding honesty/humility's indirect effects on leader outcomes through ethical leadership for leaders with high self-control, these findings contribute specifically to the leader integrity literature and more generally to the character and leadership literature. While several leadership theories emphasize the importance of ethical aspects of leader character (see Bass 2008 for reviews), integrity has received the most attention in the literature (Palanski et al. 2015). Given that humble leaders are most sincere (Owens and Hekman 2012, p. 798), this stream of

research affirms that leader honesty and humility are essential parts of ethical leadership (Brown and Mitchell 2010). Empirical studies have linked perceived leader effectiveness with perceptions of the leader's honesty and humility (Brown et al. 2005; Mahsud et al. 2010). Despite this progress, the field still lacks well-specified theoretical bases and empirical tests of aspects of leader integrity (Palanski et al. 2015). The current study contributes to this literature by responding to such calls for research by empirically examining their relation to leader outcomes which have ultimate implications for positive subordinate outcomes. Our demonstration of self-control as a mechanism for enhancing the influence of honesty/humility on ethical leadership and its outcomes clarifies how character is transmitted to subordinates by supporting Baumeister and Exline's (1999) claim that self-control should be regarded as "the master virtue" (p. 1189) that activates honesty and humility when they are required. In activating honesty/humility in manifestations of ethical leadership, self-control appears to reference moral standards of integrity and temperance required for ethical leaders to do the right thing.

Regarding empathy's indirect effects on leader outcomes through ethical leadership for leaders with high self-control, these findings provide insight into the role of emotion as a motivational mechanism. Empathy involves sensitivity to the suffering of others that often invokes empathic distress (e.g., sadness) for the observer. Such distress is uncomfortable but can be alleviated by taking action to help the target of empathy (Bandura 1991a). Expressing concern for others and providing help enhances the quality of relationships with them (Kellett et al. 2002). Given that ethical leadership involves high quality relationships with subordinates (Bedi et al. 2016), study results suggest that leader self-control enhances the relationship-enhancing benefits of empathy by comparing the self's current status of empathic distress against the moral standard to do something to help. Such self-monitoring may trigger leaders' motivation to display ethical leadership behaviors that show concern and assist subordinates.

Regarding moral courage's indirect effects on leader outcomes through ethical leadership for leaders with high self-control, these findings are consistent with theoretical considerations of the determinants of moral courage in organizations. Harbour and Kisfalvi (2014) presented a conceptual model of managerial courage that identified ego strength as a factor that helps managers learn how to control their negative emotions and exercise moral courage during risky or difficult times. During such times, the possession and exercise of moral courage depletes self-control previously exerted in acts of conscious choice, responses to stimuli, and arduous self-regulation (Baumeister and Exline 1999). However, leaders with high trait self-control have larger reserves of willpower to overcome such ego depletion and gain control over fear and volition to display aspects of ethical leadership such as "discipline employees who violate moral standards" (Brown et al. 2005, p. 126). Thus, it is not surprising that study results showed self-control as enhancing the positive relationships between moral courage, ethical leadership, and in-role performance and psychological flourishing.

### Practical Managerial Implications

This study also has a number of practical implications. First, the individual character strengths of honesty/humility, empathy, and moral courage per se do not necessarily relate to ethical leadership or the associated leader outcomes examined in this study. However, when combined with high self-control, they manifest in ethical leadership, improved leader in-role performance and psychological flourishing. Given pervasive interest in performance improvement and employee wellbeing in business and industry, it is worthwhile for organizations to select members who possess high levels of these character strengths using integrity tests, and assessments of social intelligence and professional moral courage. Providing managers with training on these character strengths and ethical leadership along with 360-degree

feedback may help them better understand how their actions align with organizational values and how others perceive them in their leadership roles (Peterson and Seligman 2004; Sosik 2015). By learning about specific behaviors that reflect ethical leadership, managers may better understand the processes by which they can perform well while sustaining their psychological wellbeing.

A second implication is the importance of fostering the self-control of individuals in leadership positions. Failures in self-control account for many ethical miscues and scandals of business leaders at all management levels (Brown and Mitchell 2010); thus, organizational training efforts to prevent ego depletion and build ego strength seem prudent. To the extent that self-control is a moral muscle (Baumeister and Exline 1999), human resource departments can offer training modules suggested by Hagger et al. (2010) and others regarding skills and habits to strengthen self-control, or tactics to reduce negative affect and fatigue that deplete self-control. They also can provide dietary recommendations for sustaining adequate blood glucose levels as another means to preserve reserves of self-control for ethical leaders (Baumeister et al. 2007).

### Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

This study has several strengths. First, we address a gap in the ethical leadership literature by examining how honesty/ humility, empathy, and moral courage relate to ethical leadership and leader outcomes of in-role performance and psychological flourishing rather than typical subordinate outcomes. Second, we add to this literature by demonstrating how each of these character strengths interacts with leader self-control to relate with ethical leadership and these leader outcomes. Third, we expand research on leader wellbeing by identifying leader self-control as a personal resource that strengthens the association between ethical leadership and leader psychological flourishing. Fourth, we contribute to an emerging stream of research on leadership triads (Offstein et al. 2006) by testing our research model using multi- source data

from leaders, subordinates, and superiors in the USAF, a context that emphasizes character and ethics, as do some businesses. USAF culture values ethical leadership and aspects of character such as honesty/humility, empathy, moral courage, and self-control, thus making our focus on these constructs indeed appropriate (USAF 2015a).

Despite these strengths, several study limitations that offer future research directions remain. Methodologically, some character strengths (i.e., self-control) are best measured using self-reports because they tap into the inner directives of the self that are often not observable by others (Peterson and Seligman 2004). Nevertheless, future research should consider assessing character strengths from both the leader and subordinate perspectives as a means to assess leaders' self-awareness of their character strengths. An additional limitation concerns the ratings of ethical leadership being limited in most cases to only one subordinate for each leader. Single subordinate ratings may have resulted in idiosyncratic results descriptive of only that leader-subordinate dyad, particularly if leaders had provided us with a list of subordinates who would evaluate the leaders' ethical leadership most favorably. This selection bias may yield restricted variance on the leadership variable, which is positively skewed. However, this concern may be alleviated, given the many significant mediation and moderation results that could not have been obtained with a serious range restriction in the ratings. Future research, nonetheless, should examine ratings for several unique leader-subordinate dyads or multiple subordinates' ratings for each leader. Also, although the temporal ordering of the variables in our model were theoretically justified, the data were collected at the same general point in time, thereby precluding any causal claims from being made. Future longitudinal or experimental designs testing the influence of character strengths on ethical leadership and its associated outcomes for leaders varying in self-control should be conducted to address this issue.

The unique nature of our sample provides another set of methodological limitations. The sample was comprised of primarily White male leaders, subordinates, and superiors serving in the USAF which may limit the generalizability of study results. The strong ethical climate in the USAF, while appropriate for the model tested in this study, may be quite different from what is found in businesses that do not have such climates. Yet, a review of the mission and value statements of corporations such as Johnson and Johnson, Whole Foods Markets, and Zappos indicates that character development and ethicality are also valued in business contexts. Thus, a future study examining our research model in two unique settings with distinct ethical climates (e.g., military vs. business) or a research model with ethical climate as a moderator is warranted. Further, the USAF's integration of both task execution and leader performance into superiors' evaluations of officers' in-role performance is another sample-specific limitation because these aspects of performance differ in most other contexts such as corporations. Future empirical research should consider the extent to which these types of leader performance are related.

From the theoretical perspective of SCT of moral thought and action (Bandura 1991a), this study focused on leader character strengths (i.e., traits) as a manifestation of ethical leadership. However, cognition, affect, and behavior also can serve as transmission mechanisms for character (Sosik et al. 2018). Further, other leadership styles or behaviors such as authentic, transformational, servant, and spiritual leadership may mediate relations between character strengths and leader outcomes, similar to how ethical leadership did in this study. Future studies can model various traits, cognitions, affect, and/or behaviors as character transmission mechanisms and determine their effects on these outcome variables within subordinate–leader–superior triadic relationships.

## Conclusions

For moral, legal, and practical reasons, organizations are interested in developing character and ethical leadership and reaping their associated benefits. This study suggests that character strengths play a pivotal role in fostering leader in-role performance and psychological flourishing. Empathic ethical leaders perform well and morally courageous ethical leaders flourish psychologically. More importantly, this study indicates that not only do leaders have to possess high levels of honesty/humility, empathy, and moral courage, but also high self-control which appears to enhance the effectiveness of these character strengths in triggering displays of ethical leadership and its associated leader outcomes. Thus, organizations that can select and/or train leaders to possess these character strengths are more likely to yield performance excellence and psychological wellbeing for those wishing to put character into action.

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Table 1. *Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations*

| Variables | *M* | *SD* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Age | 31.23 | 4.83 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Gender | .27 | .45 | .125 | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Education | 3.56 | .50 | .105 | .151* | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Honesty/humility | 3.66 | .63 | .228** | .169* | –.076 | (.755) | | | | | | |
| 5. Empathy | 3.44 | .44 | .086 | .095 | .030 | .263** | (.749) | | | | | |
| 6. Moral courage | 5.74 | .85 | .064 | .145* | –.020 | .336** | .372** | (.901) | | | | |
| 7. Self-control | 3.58 | .59 | –.092 | –.117 | –.062 | .036 | –.034 | –.088 | (.889) | | | |
| 8. Ethical leadership | 4.38 | .55 | –.004 | .037 | .048 | .060 | .035 | .137* | .052 | (.918) | | |
| 9. Psychological flourishing | 4.14 | .55 | .121 | .181* | .019 | .347** | .403** | .526** | –.004 | .185** | (.871) | |
| 10. In-role performance | 4.59 | .52 | –.119 | .124 | .084 | .150 | .223* | .135 | .029 | .265** | .175 | (.866) |

*Notes.* $N = 218$ for all variables, except $N = 115$ for in-role performance. Values in parentheses along the diagonal are Cronbach's alphas. Gender was coded as 0 = male and 1 = female. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Table 2. *Results of Leader Outcomes*

| | Mediator | | | | | | Leader outcomes | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Ethical leadership (EL) | | | | | | Psychological flourishing | In-role performance |
| Predictors | Model 1 | Model1-1 | Model 2 | Model 2-1 | Model 3 | Model 3-1 | Model 5 | Model 6 |
| Constant | 3.805 (.346)** | 3.183 (.434)** | 3.697 (.308)** | 3.741 (.397)** | 4.332 (.359)** | 3.654 (.416)** | 1.287 (.363)** | 3.012 (.545)** |
| Honesty/humility (HH) | .022 (.062) | .021 (.073) | .009 (.062) | –.005 (.074) | .020 (.063) | .000 (.073) | .138 (.052)** | .069 (.079) |
| Empathy | –.029 (.089) | .186 (.107) | .020 (.090) | .213 (.107)* | –.005 (.090) | .224 (.106)* | .272 (.075)** | .171 (.116) |
| Moral courage | .117 (.048)* | .104 (.063) | .114 (.048)* | .120 (.063) | .116 (.049)* | .080 (.064) | .244 (.040)** | –.002 (.067) |
| Self-control | .059 (.062) | –.097 (.085) | .008 (.064) | –.110 (.086) | .084 (.063) | –.066 (.082) | | |
| Honesty/humility×Self-control | .250 (.076)** | .364 (.132)** | | | | | | |
| Empathy×Self-control | | | .360 (.112)** | .484 (.181)** | | | | |
| Moral courage×Self-control | | | | | .118 (.045)** | .312 (.098)** | | |
| Ethical leadership | | | | | | | .118 (.056)* | .226 (.099)* |

(*Continued below*)

Table 2. *Results of Leader Outcomes* (*continued*)

| | | Conditional indirect effects | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Indirect relationships | Self-control | Indirect effects (Boot *SE*) | Boot 95% CI |
| HH – EL – Psych. flourishing | High | .020 (.014) | [ .001, .057] |
| | Low | –.015 (.014) | [–.054, .001] |
| HH – EL – In-role performance | High | .049 (.034) | [ .002, .144] |
| | Low | –.039 (.036) | [–.142, .004] |
| Empathy – EL – Psych. flourishing | High | .027 (.019) | [ .001, .086] |
| | Low | –.023 (.019) | [–.079, .001] |
| Empathy – EL – In-role performance | High | .106 (.074) | [ .004, .306] |
| | Low | –.010 (.035) | [–.101, .046] |
| Moral courage – EL – Psych. flourishing | High | .022 (.015) | [ .001, .058] |
| | Low | .006 (.013) | [–.015, .033] |
| Moral courage – EL – In-role performance | High | .056 (.034) | [ .006, .144] |
| | Low | –.020 (.025) | [–.097, .009] |

*Notes.* $N = 218$ for psychological flourishing. $N = 115$ for in-role performance. Regression coefficients in Models 1, 2, and 3 result from $N = 218$ for psychological flourishing. Regression coefficients in Models 1-1, 2-1, and 3-1 result from $N = 115$ for in-role performance. Unstandardized estimates with standard errors in parentheses are reported. Bootstrap $N = 10000$. Unstandardized estimates with standard errors in parentheses are reported. High and low Self-control = mean ± 1*SD*. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

*Figure 1*. A Research Model of Leader Character Strengths, Ethical Leadership and Outcomes

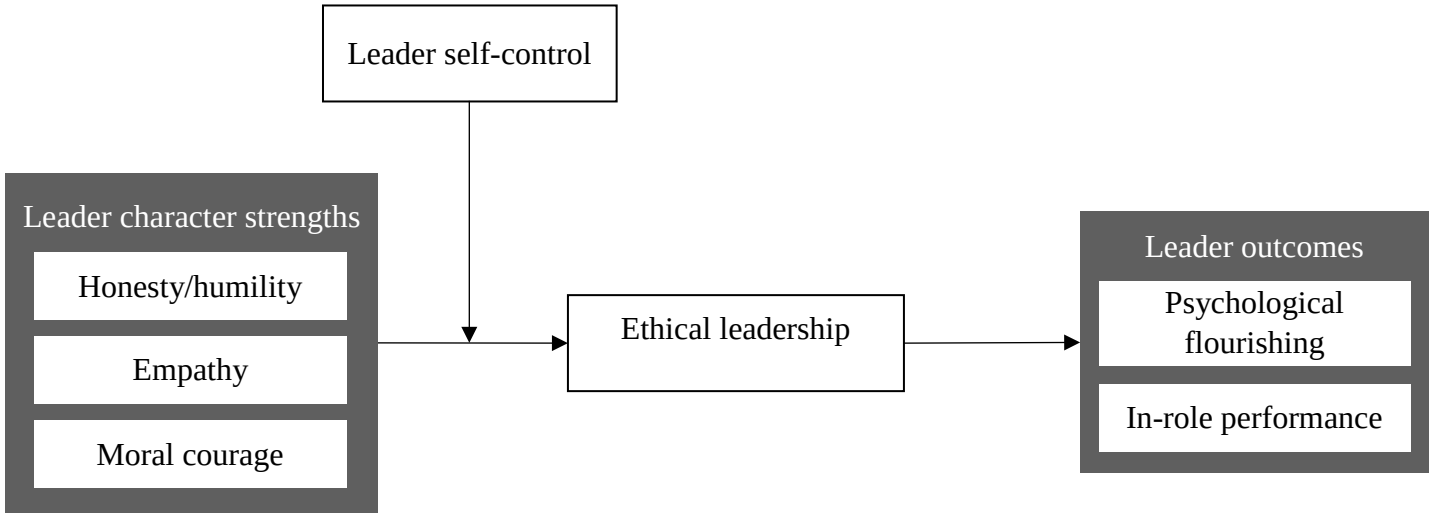

*Figure 2*. Moderating Effect of Leader Self-Control on the relationship between Leader Character Strengths and Ethical Leadership